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TAGS: CH HK PGOV PHUM PINR PREL

SUBJECT: HONG KONG DISTRICT COUNCIL ELECTION: A TRIAL RUN
FOR DEMOCRACY

REF: HONG KONG 1853

Classified By: E/P Chief Laurent Charbonnet. Reasons: 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On November 18, Hong Kong will choose 529 District Councillors, 80 percent of them directly elected by universal suffrage. The District Councils are subordinate to the Legislative Council, but play an increasingly important advisory role to the government on grass-roots issues. While we expect no changes before the November vote, the democrats will continue to press for direct election of the remaining 20 percent of District Councillors, as a building block for their advocacy of direct election of the entire Legislative Council (Legco, in 2008) and of the next Chief Executive (CE, in 2012), while the pro-Beijing parties will advocate a slower timetable for full democracy. All parties will also have to take into consideration the recent release of the Government's long-anticipated Green Paper on democratic reform. The three-month period for discussion of the Green Paper will end just as the District Council election campaigns begin in mid-October, so debate on democratic reform will likely accompany and perhaps overshadow local district issues.

End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: The District Council (DC) election process has taken a step backwards since British rule when all District Board members were directly elected. After the handover in 1997, then-CE Tung Chee Hwa instated the appointment of 102 of the 529 district council members beginning with the DC election in 1999. Now Hong Kong democrats are pushing for the abolishment of the appointed seats at the District Council level, consistent with their advocacy of direct elections by universal suffrage at the Legco and CE level. Though never viewed as important as the Legco or Chief Executive (CE) elections, this year the DC Elections are generating more attention, given the recent release of the Green Paper and timing of the elections, only ten months in advance of the next Legco election.

End Comment.

Hong Kong District Council: A Primer

¶3. (U) The District Council was established in 1982 by the British colonial administration to advise the Hong Kong Government (HKG) on local issues within Hong Kong's 18 districts. Following Hong Kong's 1997 reversion to China, District Management Committees (DMCs) chaired by District Officers (DOs) were set up for each district. Depending on

the size of the district, each DMC has between 14 and 46 District Councillors (DCs), elected by universal suffrage or by functional constituencies who serve as liaisons between their local constituencies and the HKG; the total number of DCs currently is 529. The DCs and the DOs work closely together and report to the Steering Committee on District Administration (SCDA), which is chaired by the Secretary for Home Affairs.

Basic Law Authorization

14. (U) The Hong Kong Basic Law (Article 97) authorizes the establishment of "district organizations which are not organs of political power" to advise the HKG and provide local services. Other Hong Kong laws and regulations specify the role, functions, and composition of the District Councillors.

In general, they are charged with informing the HKG on matters affecting the well-being of their constituents and the provision and use of public facilities and services within their districts. They also allocate central government funds for environmental improvements, promote recreational and cultural programs, and sponsor community activities.

Providing More Resources to District Councils

15. (C) In January, a pilot scheme endorsed by the Executive Council was launched in four districts (Wan Chai, Wong Tai Sin, Tuen Mun, and Sai Kung) to provide additional resources for District Councils to initiate community-involvement projects. The proposal will be fully implemented in all 18 districts by the next District Council term in January, 2008.

The proposal stipulates an annual provision of HK\$300

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million (US\$38.5 million) to support work in the 18 districts; however, it is unclear how the funds will be distributed. Cyd Ho, former Legco member and current District Councillor in the Central and Western district, informed us that she and fellow District Councillors repeatedly asked former Secretary for Home Affairs Patrick Ho to provide a formula showing how the funds will be distributed, but the office of the Secretary has yet to announce its methodology. Cyd Ho believes the District Councils are playing increasingly important roles in urban development, environmental protection, and "social equality." The additional funds will further strengthen their positions. However, concerns that the HK\$300 million will be allocated unfairly have overshadowed the positive intentions of the proposal.

District Council Elections

16. (U) The third District Council election since the handover is scheduled for November 18, 2007. As specified in the District Council Ordinance, 400 councillors will be directly elected by voters casting single ballots. Each district gets one councillor for every 17,000 residents, approximately. They represent geographically determined sub-districts. The candidate who receives the largest number of votes from his sub-district wins; there is no run-off election. In addition, the Hong Kong Chief Executive will appoint 102 DCs, and 27 ex-officio members will be chosen from the chairmen of Rural Committees in the New Territories. In choosing the 102 appointed DCs, the CE reportedly considers the candidates' "professional qualifications, commitment to service, personal integrity, past record of public service, as well as recommendations by the Home Affairs Bureau," according to the Constitutional Affairs Bureau. Since the 529 District Council members also select 42 of their members for seats on the 800-member CE Election Committee, the CE has a particular interest in selecting council members who share his views. All 529 DCs will serve a four-year term that will begin on January 1, 2008.

Pan-Democratic Unity?

¶7. (SBU) In 2003, candidates from the democratic parties won 92 seats (77 percent) of the 120 contested seats; the remaining 280 of the 400 directly elected seats were uncontested. Though the democrats were able to obtain more elected seats than the pro-government parties, the CE's appointment of 102 pro-government members, combined with incumbents in uncontested seats, resulted in a District Council with a pro-Beijing majority. With this in mind, for the 2007 election the pan-democratic parties -- Democratic Party, Civic Party, and The Frontier -- have formed an alliance called the "Democratic Coalition for District Council Elections." Their principal demand is universal suffrage for all elections and the abolition of appointed seats in the District Council. The coalition hopes that early coordination among pan-democratic candidates will increase the final number of candidates running in the November elections. Richard Tsoi Yiu-Cheong, spokesman for the coalition and the key player in initiating negotiations among the democratic candidates, announced in July that the pan-democrats would field 282 candidates to contest 272 constituencies; 134 of the candidates would be incumbents.

¶8. (C) Starry Lee Wai-King, District Councillor for the Kowloon City District and a member of the pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), informed us that the DAB began organizing and preparing its members to run in the 2007 DC election back in ¶2005. According to Lee, the DAB has been recruiting members actively for past two years and is determined to maintain its status as Hong Kong's largest political party. In regards to universal suffrage for the CE and Legco elections, the DAB supports the full implementation of "one man, one vote" by 2017 as congruent with Hong Kong's Basic Law principle of gradual and orderly progress.

Rehearsal for Legco Elections

¶9. (C) In some respects, the 2007 District Council election will constitute a trial run for the September 2008 Legislative Council (Legco) election. The political parties will see how much local support they can generate for leading candidates, learn about media reaction, and improve their campaign strategies for the Legco election. Civic

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Participation Progam Manager Yan-yan Yip of ivic Exchange (an independent Hong Kong think-tak) told us that District Council election results may not, however, accurately predict any particuar results for the Legco election. In 2003, the pan-democrats won more District Council seats than the pro-government candidates, but the latter then "fought a better battle" and gained more seats in the 2004 Legco elections. Note: The November elections will be particularly important for the Civic Party. Founded in 2006 with Kuan Hsin-Chi as chairperson, the Civic Party gained legitimacy and support when party member Alan Leong ran and lost as the only opposition against incumbent Donald Tsang in the March 2007 Chief Executive election. The 2007 District Council election will be first in the party's history.

"Green Paper Effect"

¶10. (SBU) On July 11, the Hong Kong Government released a "Green Paper" outlining various options for electoral reform (reftel). The three-month public consultation and comment period will conclude just one month before the District Council election, so the candidates and their parties probably will need to address in their campaigns many of the issues raised in the paper. The candidates' positions on electoral reform and universal suffrage may be factored into

their parties' election strategies. Yip of Civic Exchange believes that candidates will avoid in-depth discussion of the numerous components of the Green Paper, but will stress their stances on the major points, such as "for or against universal suffrage by 2012." Candidates must declare their intentions to run six weeks before the November 18 election date, five days before the conclusion of the Green Paper consultation period.

¶11. (SBU) The Green Paper also includes detailed proposals for reforming the role and the election process of the District Councils. For example, the number of District Council members serving on the Chief Executive (CE) Election Committee might increase from 42; thus it is in the interest of all parties to gain support and establish positions in as many constituencies as possible to increase their chances of influencing the next CE election.

Public Participation in Politics

¶12. (C) According to Ronald Chan, deputy to former Secretary for Security Regina Yip and co-founder of her Savantas Policy Institute (a Hong Kong-based think-tank), 2007 will be the "most competitive year in the history of DC Elections" and that "every seat will be contested," unlike in the past. Both Yan-yan Yip of Civic Exchange and Ronald Chan speculate that the candidates running in the 2007 District Council elections will be younger compared to previous elections. Chan, in his mid-20s, is considering running for a seat in the Pok Fu Lam district on Hong Kong Island against an incumbent who has been in office for nearly ten years. He believes younger Hong Kongers are more politically active, and are shaking off the stereotype of being politically apathetic and economically driven. Yip believes the trend toward younger politicians, along with more civic groups and organizations began in 2003 in response to the hot issues (Article 23 security legislation, SARS epidemic, huge July 1 democracy demonstration) of that year.

¶13. (SBU) Although voter turnout for the 2003 District Council elections was 44 percent, up from 30 percent in 1999, 2003 was unique as it saw political controversy and a sharp economic downturn; all the political parties are concerned that voters may be less politically engaged in 2007, a much more economically and socially stable time. To address this issue as well as compensate for inflation, the HKG has increased the campaign expense limit from HK\$45,000 to HK\$48,000 (US\$6,154); it hopes a larger campaign budget will encourage candidates to campaign more vigorously and motivate more people to vote.

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